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A competitive atmosphere in class can be bad for children's education, according to new research published as part of the biggest review of primary schooling for 40 years.

The Cambridge University study said children should play and talk together more in lessons despite the traditional view that chatter can be disruptive.

And teachers should praise pupils for their efforts rather than reward them for good results, the research said.

Cambridge professors Christine Howe and Neil Mercer conducted the study for the Primary Review, a major two-year study into primary education. The academics said "social interaction and collaborative activity" in class can provide "valuable opportunities" for learning.

"This challenges the traditional view that talk and social interaction among children are irrelevant, if not disruptive to learning," the report said.

"Generally speaking, tasks should be designed to encourage co-operation and group cohesion, rather than competitiveness," the study added.

The report questioned the theory that encouraging pupils to compete increased their motivation to learn. And it warned: "Disputational talk, which is highly competitive and full of disagreements, is not conducive to learning in the particular context of pupil-led group work."

Instead teachers should encourage "exploratory talk", which involves children "sharing, challenging and evaluating their views". "Talk and social interaction among children play a key role in children's social development and learning," the study said.

"Research on collaborative learning across the arts, science and mathematics supports the view that joint activity among pupils should be an intrinsic and integrated aspect of classroom life."

But the academics warned that pupils "seldom" have the chance to engage in co-operative discussions.